

“The point is to change it”: The Imperative for Activist Literary Studies

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Abstract

The task undertaken in this paper is to discover a means by which the practice of literary criticism can derive an imperative for activism that confronts and changes the social conditions it critiques. The case of Karl Marx’s use of world literature in his critique of capitalism and the state, set within the history of the development of continental philosophy, is explored through a close-reading of its intertextuality. Particular attention is paid to Marx’s use of quotations from and allusions to world literature, including Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Goethe and Heine, to register the harmful inversions caused by an economy based on money and commodities. If literature registers the contradictions of its time in its form and content, then the urge to resolve those contradictions sits restless in literature. When Marx inserts literature into his theoretical texts, he transfers into his text the impulse of the contradiction to resolve itself. Similarly, literary criticism is well-placed to unfold clear, obvious and necessary logic which leads to activism.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Marxism, Activism, Literary Criticism, Inversions

1

Literature constructs its scenes from the material and social struggles of historical actors. It registers the contradictions of its time in its form and content. The author lifts features of the struggle from history and abstracts them in the art. According to Adorno's aesthetic theory, well-formed art, constructed from and brimming with the contradictions of its time, confronts the readers' subjectivity and has the potential to awaken them from sleepy reified consciousness.

The material and historical struggles (class, race, gender, and others) and their contradictions sit restless in the fiction (poetic, dramatic, narrative) and clamour for resolution. This demand for resolution serves as the wellspring of an urge (*Drang*) that surges up and threatens to break through (*dringen*) during the encounter with literature (reading, watching a play, etc.) This *Drang* is part of what makes literature evocative and powerful; it calls forth emotions, thoughts and judgment from the reader. However, the struggles and contradictions registered in literature do not necessarily become salient at this level of encounter. That exegesis requires literary criticism.

Literary criticism close-reads, analyses and interprets the text. *Ana-lysis* is the process of unfolding, pulling apart and laying-out-flat significant elements of literary texts.¹ These elements include the struggles and contradictions registered in the text. It is only at this point, at the level of criticism, that these struggles and contradictions are named. The characters experience desire, frustration, fear, self-doubt, double-binds, traumatic scenes, existential dread, etc. The context for these issues is the contradictions that arise from class exploitation, racism, misogyny, Queer bashing, ecocide, etc. Literary criticism renders these contradictions explicit.² The author *depicts* the struggle; the critic *interprets* it. Interpretation is a further abstraction. Real lives are constructed as fictional

1 The word *analysis* is a borrowing from Latin, where it denotes to resolve something into its elements. Its etymological root in Greek, *ἀνάλυσις*, denotes the action of loosing, undoing or releasing (O.E.D.)

2 The focus in this paper will be on literary criticism which takes up social questions. However, even in criticism that is not necessarily organised around a social question, contradictions can still be uncovered and interpreted. For example, textual studies can critique patriarchal power in literary canonisation, and translation studies can uncover female translators whose identity and contributions have been hidden and repressed behind translation project branding. The present author's work on Dorothea Tieck and Caroline Schlegel repressed in the history of the *Schlegel-Tieck* German translation of Shakespeare's plays is an example of the latter case. See Smith, Christian. *Translations and Influence: Dorothea Tieck's Translations of Shakespeare. Borrowers and Lenders, XI, 2*, Spring 2018 <https://www.borrowers.uga.edu/783932/show>

scenes and interpreted as themes in criticism. The struggle moves from occurring on the street to appearing on the page to being discussed in the lecture hall. Each level of abstraction makes the struggle more salient, more available for critique, and more fit for provoking activism.

Literary criticism is driven by theory, and most theory is built from the contradictions and struggles that are registered in the literature. Marxist (class), feminist, Queer, race, postcolonial, and other literary theories owe their existence to the very problems they theorise. These theories close-read literature, looking for the struggles they are named after and use the literary depictions of these struggles to read their present moment. In literary theory, the material struggle reaches its highest level of abstraction and is presented to its readers/ scholars/ students to be read, discussed, examined and written about further. Literary scholars use their readings of poems, plays, stories and novels—of any time period—to make statements about material and social history.

And yet, can literary criticism make changes in history? Can it be a force in changing the conditions it studies? Can literary criticism be activist?

Certainly, there are literary critics who are also political activists. One might research and teach in a university literature department and also participate in workplace strikes, walk a picket line, go to a demonstration, or even fight in a revolution. These critics’ activism stands *parallel* to their scholarship. They may have been influenced by their scholarship to decide to join a movement. They may be activist as employees of an educational institution; in this case their activism follows from their class position. They may be activists in a particular movement as members of a specific oppressed group, for example female professors who work in the struggle for women’s rights, or professors of colour who work in the struggle for civil rights.

The task undertaken in this paper is to find a logic for activism that is not merely parallel to one’s scholarship, but, instead, is *a result* of one’s scholarship. This would be activism that *unfolds logically from one’s literary theory*. It would be immanent, systematic and necessary. The unfolding would call for the resolution of existing contradictions which have been analysed by the theory; this resolution would necessitate the overthrow of existing economic, political and social structures that create the contradictions.³

3 The goal of this paper is not to discuss *where* literary criticism will work for activist change, but *how* it will unfold that imperative in its logic. However, it may be necessary for now to list the various ways in which literary criticism circulates through society. Literary scholars speak to other scholars at conferences and through publications. At its best, the academy is a site for collective development and critique of ideas by people well-studied in their particular field. The ideas in this essay, for example, were read and critiqued by two readers and an editor before appearing here. And now they are being read and considered by

2

To find a method for an activist literary theory, one can turn to the writings of Karl Marx, a revolutionary critic of the existing systems of his time—capitalism and the nation-state—who used world literature extensively in his activist writings. Marx was a philosopher and a journalist; he was not a literary critic. However, a study of his use of literature may offer a model for criticism to derive activism.

Marx's thought can be understood within the development of continental philosophy as an advanced stage in the evolution of philosophy's critical enterprise which has progressively shed abstraction and immanetised itself in the world.⁴ An activist continental philosophy was not possible until Marx's dialectical materialism. However, a reading of the development of German philosophy, from Kant to Hegel to Marx, reveals a latent urge towards social activism even in the idealist philosophers.

The age of critique is inaugurated by Kant's project to establish the limits of knowledge through a critical stance with regards to the form of reason itself. To stake out this critical stance, Kant positions reason outside of the material world; his transcendental idealism establishes an insurmountable wall between thought and being. Kant forecloses the possibility of knowing things-in-themselves; instead experience is synthesised from a combination of *a priori* concepts and aesthetic data. When he applies his critical stance to morality in his second critique, he insists that one *cannot* know good itself. Instead one can only reflect on the concept of law and extract the formal features of what a law

the readers of this journal. Though this group is most likely small, it is significant in the development of the argument and its circulation. Most literary critics also teach students at multiple levels of higher education. Their texts are assigned to students by other scholars. Many people first become social activists at university as a result of what they have been learning. As long as attendance at university remains high and students choose to study literature, the number of people reached by the work of literary critics is significant. This makes the fight to save the humanities crucial for social change. Some scholars are public intellectuals and their work makes contact with the general public—including rulers, politicians, policy-makers, and social activists—through books, newspapers, blogs, podcasts, social media, video platforms, and public lectures. Through social activist public education, literary criticism can be taken up as an intellectual practice by people who are employed in work other than scholarship. Finally, some ideas from literary criticism are also carried in the oral discourse of the general public, including in film and television adaptations of literary texts, and in the creative appropriations of fandom. On fandom see, for example, the work of Valerie Fazel and Louise Geddes, eds., including *The Shakespeare User: Critical and Creative Appropriations in a Networked Culture*, London; Palgrave, 2017.

⁴ This section of the paper has benefitted from discussion with Stephen Barrell (Warwick Philosophy). Some of the notions discussed here were presented to the present author in personal communication with Barrell in May, 2020.

grounded on the good would look like. These features are posited as a synthetic *a priori* practical principle, which is universal and non-contradictory. This is the categorical imperative:

Handle so, daß du die Menschheit, sowohl in deiner Person, als in der Person eines jeden andern, jederzeit *zugleich* als Zweck, niemals bloß als Mittel brauchest (Kant, 1977, Kindle location 814)

Act so that you use humanity, in your person as well as in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means (Kant, 2012).

The imperative must be treated as a fundamental law of practical reason:

Handle so, daß die Maxime deines Willens jederzeit zugleich als Prinzip einer allgemeinen Gesetzgebung gelten könne (Kant, 2003, 41).

Act so that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in a giving of universal law (Kant, 1997, 28).

Finally, Kant admits that this position is actually not completely attainable, and that one can only strive (*streben*) to approach it (1997, 71).

The critical spirit suffused the social, political, theological and scientific landscapes of Kant’s day, and, consequently, as a historical movement, contained an activist urge in it. Indeed, it contains the epistemological roots of the Enlightenment which is the context for significant historical changes. However, due to the limitations imposed by Kant’s method, the philosopher worked outside of the material stage of history. G. W. F. Hegel critiqued Kant’s transcendentalism and placed reason back onto the historical stage. In Hegel’s philosophy, critique is *immanent* in worldly knowledge; it has no existence beyond this manifestation. However, for Hegel, critique is the activity of *reason itself*, overcoming its limitations and contradictions. This overcoming is a process of unfolding; each step of the unfolding is to be found immanent in the former step. There is no need to force movement in Hegel’s method. Instead, the philosopher must stand back and allow (*zu lassen*) the unfolding of the logic (Hegel 1969, 72). In this manner, the logic will be generated (*hervorbringen*). The progressive determination of each of these steps in the logic is necessitated by its own nature, by the dialectical movement of its *becoming*. For Hegel, *freedom* reveals itself as the *truth* of this necessity.

Hegel’s immanent critique insists on two requirements. First, it prohibits all presuppositions in order to begin the unfolding from the beginning—*reines*

Sein (pure being). Even at the beginning, *pure being* has already passed over into *pure nothing*, and the dialectic moves along unfolding the next step from the contradictions immanent in the previous step. This state of immanent *becoming* continues in Hegel's philosophy until he reaches, at the end of the *Logic*, the abstract notion of the Absolute Idea (*die absolute Idee*). The absolute nature of the Idea becomes apparent when the philosopher achieves the unalienated grasp of the *being* to which she belongs, and by adhering to the second requirement, the mutual recognition of the *self* and the *other*.

Starting in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a text from which one is tempted to source Hegelian ethics, Hegel prepares readers to accept that the *self* is determined by the presence of the *other* in it.⁵ However, Hegel is not preparing the readers for an ethical life grounded in acceptance of, and empathy for, the *other*. Instead he is laying down the groundwork for his logic. Recognising the *other* in the *self* prepares one to allow the first movement of the logic: *nothing* sublates (*aufheben*) *being*. As soon as this sublation is allowed, the logic begins unfolding, passing through *determinate being* in the relationship between *something* and *other*, *finitude* and *infinity*, and *being-for-self*, from which the *One* is derived and the conditions for *quantity* are set up. This long and difficult section on quantity tracks *being* as it passes through notions of *magnitude* and will form a basis for Hegel's later work in the philosophy of nature. From here, the *quantum* comes into unity with its qualitative significance as *measure*, in which the notion of the next section, *essence*, is already immanent. Hegel then derives the *Notion* (*Der Begriff*), of which *being* and *essence* are its moments of *becoming*. In the *Logic*, abstract *being* passes over into determinate being, but then withdraws into essence. Essence reveals itself to be determined as ground, thereby enters existence and realises itself as substance, but then withdraws into Notion. Towards the end of the *Logic*, notion determines itself into objectivity, which then withdraws into the *Idea*.

Activism cannot arise from Hegel's philosophy, because this unfolding of the logic is achieved by standing back and allowing *being* to realise itself. However, Hegel *does* have a philosophy of society; he writes this in his lectures on the *Philosophy of Right*. In order to be expressions of freedom, the notions and structures derived in the *Right* must become logically *explicit* from what is immanently *implicit* in *Geist*. According to Hegel, *Geist*'s freedom can only be expressed when externalised as *private property*, *the family*, and *the state*. The state is rational in and for itself inasmuch as it is the actuality of the substantial will which it possesses in the particular self-consciousness that has been raised to its

5 The purpose of this paragraph is to lay out the steps Hegel takes in his philosophy, but not to explain them. The reader need not fully understand each term, but rather the logic of the *progression* of the steps, to understand the point being made in this section on Hegel.

universality. It is the unity of the individual and the universal. The state is the final concept derived in the *Philosophy of Right*; it is the goal of the lectures. Here one recalls the infamous sally with which Hegel opens the *Philosophy of Right*: “Was vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich;/ und was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig” (1970, 24). (What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational).⁶ And what is actual for Hegel in human society is private property, the family and the (existing Prussian) state.⁷

In 1837 a 19-year-old student called Karl Marx arrived at the University of Berlin, where Hegel taught philosophy until his death in 1831. Over the next five years, under the guidance of Hegel’s successor, Eduard Gans, and in study groups with Left Hegelians, Marx studied philosophy and critiqued Hegel’s conclusions. In 1842, Marx moved to Köln to begin his writing career as a journalist, working first at a Liberal daily newspaper, the *Rheinische Zeitung*. The newspaper offices were in a building on Schildergasse on one side of the Neumarkt, where the Prussian military paraded as the occupying force. Marx stayed at the Hotel Laacher Hof, on the other side of the Platz. In the midst of the occupying forces, Marx took up the critique of the Prussian occupation of Rhineland in his articles.⁸

Through his critique of Prussian imperialism and exploitation of Rhineland, in the *Rheinische Zeitung*, Marx meticulously picked apart Hegel’s conclusion that the state could properly represent the people. Part of this critique included his first look at the economic question, which he began in his article on the Prussian Laws on the Theft of Wood. In 1843, after the Prussians censored and shut down Marx’s newspaper, Marx embarked on a direct critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* for a journal he founded in Paris, the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*.

Marx shows that Hegel goes astray and the dialectic grinds to a halt in the beginning of the *Philosophy of Right*, where Hegel posits private property—the

6 All translation from German are by the present author, unless otherwise cited.

7 Stephen Houlgate does find an active political outcome from Hegel’s philosophy in his notion of freedom. He writes that, “ethical life (Sittlichkeit), for Hegel, is thus the sphere of human subjectivity conceived as the realm of objective freedom and right” (2005, 195), and that, “freedom is not just to be found in unrestricted individual choice or in unregulated pursuit of self-satisfaction, but in living in accordance with law within a just political constitution” (182). Significantly for the present study, Houlgate signals the role of literature (as art) in Hegel’s system: “If absolute freedom is to be attained, therefore, it will not be through economic or political activity, but through an understanding of absolute character or truth of existence in art, religion and philosophy” (210) (emphasis by author).

8 This discussion of the locations of Marx’s work and residence in Köln comes from the present author’s research and from discussion with Jürgen Herres (Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften).

private ownership of exchange value—as the expression of the will of *Geist*. Using Hegel’s own logic, it is clear that exchange-value is *being-for-self* (*Fürsichsein*) which finds its determination in the *other*—the labourer—and then attempts to annihilate him as it turns inward and fortresses itself in self-relating *quantity*.⁹ Hegel’s theory of private property, civil society and state is laden with contradictions that clamour for resolution. Hegel was prevented from correctly continuing his dialectical method into his theory of society by the historical conditions of his own society and the formation of his subjectivity and scholarship. The next step would require someone formed in different historical conditions, and someone who could continue the unfolding of continental philosophy no longer restrained by the transcendentalism of Kant or the idealism of Hegel.

3

Before Marx became a scholar, he wanted to be a poet. He read Shakespeare, Goethe, Heine and other poets from an early age. From adolescence through to his university years, he wrote many poems, including some to his father and some to his fiancée. His first published work was poetry. His transformation from a budding poet into a philosophy student was announced to his father in a letter dated November 10-11, 1837; the significant pivot in the letter, where Marx describes the moment and location where his transformation occurred, is set in the lines of a poem by Heinrich Heine.

Marx had been studying day and night in Berlin and, consequently, his health broke down from exhaustion. A doctor sent him to rest in a fishing village on the Stralau peninsula on the river Spree. Instead of resting, Marx intensified his study of Hegel’s *Logic*, surrendering his consciousness to come under the sway of the dialectic. He describes his metamorphosis like this:

...diese Arbeit...dieß mein liebstes Kind, beim Mondschein gehegt, trägt mich wie eine falsche Sirene dem Feind in den Arm...Vor Aerger konnte ich einige Tage gar nichts denken, lief wie toll im Garten an der Sprea [sic] schmutzigem Wasser, “dass Seelen wäscht und Thee verdünnt” umher, machte sogar eine Jagdparthie mit meinem Wirthe mit, rannte nach Berlin und wollte jeden Eckensteher unarmen. (*MEGA III.1*, 16)

...this work...this my favourite child, nurtured by moonlight, bore me like a false siren into the arms of the enemy...from vexation I could not think for a couple of

9 See the present author’s article on the contradictions of exchange value in *Critique* 45, 1-2, 2017.

days, I ran around as if I was crazy in the garden by the dirty water of the Spree, which “washes souls and dilutes tea”, even participated in a hunting excursion with my host, and raced to Berlin and wanted to hug every street loafer.

The moment the dialectic seized control of Marx’s mind, it temporarily disrupted his capacity to think. His body took over, running circles in the guest house garden, which stood directly on the banks of the Spree. To register his condition, Marx reaches for a quotation from Heinrich Heine’s poem “Frieden.” (“Peace”) (Heine 2007, 269) In this satirical poem, Heine mocks upwardly-mobile piety in Berlin. The line comes from a stanza that is so satirical Heine himself censored it. (Gelber 1992, 38, Praver 1978, 20).

In der frommen Stadt
Wo der Sand und der Glauben blüht,
Und der heiligen Sprea [sic] geduligtes Wasser
Die Seelen wascht und der Tee verdünnt.

In the pious city
Where sand and faith blossoms,
And the holy Spree’s patient water
Washes souls and dilutes tea.

Two features of this quotation identify the state of Marx’s consciousness at this moment of his metamorphosis. First, the stanza is bitterly satirical. Heine slams contrasting images against each other: the allegory of faith blossoming is undercut by the image of sand, which is infertile ground. The patient and holy water of the river that runs through the capital of Prussia, which Marx besmirches as *schmutzig* (dirty), is used for washing souls but also for cheating customers by diluting and thereby producing more of the commodity tea to sell. The poem describes the appearance of Christ in Berlin. Heine uses exaggerated imagery of religious peace—billowing white clouds, flowing white robes, a still lake—set in overwrought alliteration: “Im wallend weißen Gewande/ Wandelt er.... (269). Then he writes:

O Friedenswunder! Wie still die Stadt!
Es ruhte das dumpfe Geräusch
Der schwatzenden, schwülen Gewerbe,
Und durch die reinen, hallenden Straßen
Wandelten Menschen, weißgekleidete,
Palmzweigtragende

O wonder of peace! How quiet is the city!
 It silences the dull noise
 Of the babbling sultry trade,
 And along the pure reverberating streets
 Wander people, clad in white clothing
 Carrying palm leaves.

The piety of the people, dressed in white and carrying palm leaves, silences the noise of trade. The streets of Berlin are pure and reverberating. The trade, on the other hand, is babbling and sultry. With this juxtaposition, Heine registers the function of religion to cover up the sluttish intercourse of nascent capitalism in the Prussian *Hauptstadt*. This contradiction is tightened in the deleted stanza that Marx quoted, where the holy water itself both washes souls and dilutes tea. In Heine's poem, Prussian capitalism, which had already been ruthlessly exploiting Heine's and Marx's homeland, is hushed and veiled by Prussian piety.

When Marx writes this letter to his father in November 1837, he has not yet written *any* economic critique. The quotation signals to his father—a man who, as a Jew and a Liberal, suffered greatly during the Prussian occupation—that as Karl falls into the arms of the enemy—Hegelian philosophy—he is situating himself in the opposition. Indeed, Marx became an active member of the Left Hegelian tendency. The sign of his opposition is carried in his use of Heine's verse. The verse contains the contradiction, which when allowed to unfold, unmasks Prussian capitalism. The imperative of profit, registered in the image of water used to dilute tea, hushed by a hypocritical religion, registered by the image of the holy water, is dredged up to the surface. This is one role of Heine's satire. After this metamorphosis by the river, Marx began to employ this sort of satire in his writing to function as one of his main rhetorical devices.

4

One of the conceptual resources Marx sources from world literature is the use of *inversions* to register what Heinrich Heine called in an 1844 poem "*die verkehrte Welt*," the inverted world.¹⁰

10 This essay is grounded in research on the influence of world literature on Karl Marx. Most Marx biographers have written about this influence. It has been directly researched by S. S. Praver in his *Karl Marx and World Literature* (1976) and also by Jean E. Howard and Crystal Bartolovich in *Great Shakespearians, Vol. X, Marx and Freud*, (Continuum, 2012). The present author is writing a monograph on Shakespeare's influence on Karl Marx, forthcoming from Routledge.

Das ist ja die verkehrte Welt,
Wir gehen auf den Köpfen! (2007, 470)

This is certainly the inverted world
We go about on our heads.

The image of inversion here registers the new economics, the capitalist world system which was consolidated through mercantilism in the 17th century. The shock of the new money economy, which throws the whole world on its head, is also registered in many of Shakespeare’s plays. This is visible in these lines from *Timon of Athens*, which Marx quotes in almost all of his economic writings;

Gold? Yellow, glittering, precious gold?
...
Thus much of this will make
Black white, foul fair, wrong right,
Base noble, old young, coward valiant.
Ha, you gods, why this? What this, you gods? Why, this
Will lug your priests and servants from your sides,
Pluck stout men’s pillows from below their heads.
This yellow slave
Will knit and break religions, bless the accursed,
Make the hoar leprosy adored, place thieves
And give them title, knee and approbation
With senators on the bench: This is it
That makes the wappered widow wed again,
She whom the spittle house and ulcerous sores
Would cast gorge at, this embalms and spices
To th’April day again. Come, damned earth,
Thou common whore of mankind that puts odds
Among the rout of nations, I will make thee
Do thy right nature. (4.3.26-46)¹¹

Marx read these lines first in the Dorothea Tieck translation, which translates damned *earth* as *Verdammt Metall*, to make sure that German readers understood that Shakespeare meant for Timon to rant against the gold, not the earth (4.3.42).¹²

11 All lines quoted from *Timon of Athens* are from the Arden edition, 2008.

12 All lines quoted in German are from the Schlegel-Tieck Shakespeare edition, 2003.

Marx wrote that “Shakespeare excellently depicts the real nature of money,” (MECW, V3, 324). The lines prophetically register the deadly inversions caused by the financial imperative, which was only just beginning in Shakespeare’s time. The inversion causes an injustice. As such, it carries potential energy that clamours for justice; it is a wrong that demands to be righted. When Marx inserts these lines into his text, he transfers the *Drang* from the lines into his theory. Shakespeare’s depiction of the “real nature of money” loads the contradiction of the inversions into Marx’s critique. The resolution of the inversions appears logically as the overthrow of the system that causes the contradiction.

In his political journalism, Marx quotes from Shakespeare’s *King John*, a play containing one of the first uses of the word *commodity* in an economic sense. He uses the notion of commodity’s inversion from Shakespeare’s play in his critique of mid-nineteenth century British imperialism. Shakespeare’s text is set in the early 13th century, but it is riddled with anachronisms which indicate that Shakespeare meant for the inversions depicted in the setting to be applicable as a registration of the inversions in his time as well. The Bastard speaks this soliloquy:

Mad world, mad kings, mad composition!
 John, to stop Arthur’s title in the whole,
 Hath willingly departed with a part;
 And France, whose armour conscience buckled on,
 Whom zeal and charity brought to the field
 As God’s own soldier, rounded in the ear
 With that purpose-changer, that sly devil,
 That broker that still breaks the pate of faith,
 That daily break-vow, he that wins of all,
 Of kings, of beggars, old men, young men, maids,—
 Who having no external thing to lose
 But the word maid, cheats the poor maid of that
 That smooth-faced gentleman, tickling commodity;
 Commodity, the bias of the world,
 The world who of itself is peisèd well,
 Made to run even upon even ground,
 Till this advantage, this vile-drawing bias,
 This sway of motion, this commodity,
 Makes it take head from all indifferency,
 From all direction, purpose, course, intent;
 And this same bias, this commodity,
 This bawd, this broker, this all-changing word,

Clapped on the outward eye of fickle France,
Hath drawn him from his own determined aid,
From a resolved and honourable war,
To a most base and vile-concluded peace.
And why rail I on this commodity?
But for because he hath not wooed me yet—
Not that I have the power to clutch my hand
When his fair angels would salute my palm,
But for my hand, as unattempted yet,
Like a poor beggar, railleth on the rich.
Well, whiles I am a beggar I will rail
And say there is no sin but to be rich,
And being rich, my virtue then shall be
To say there is no vice but beggary.
Since kings break faith upon commodity,
Gain, be my lord, for I will worship thee.
(2.1.562-99)¹³

Marx alludes to these lines in an article written for the *New York Daily Tribune* on 31 March 1857 called, “The Coming Election in England”. The italicised lines are from *King John*, 1.1 and 2.1. The opening is an allusion to *Richard III*. Marx writes:

“Stand between two churchmen, good my Lord;
For on that ground I’ll make a holy descant.”

Palmerston does not exactly comply with the advice tendered by Buckingham to Richard III. He stands between the churchman on the one side, and the opium-smuggler on the other. While the Low Church bishops, whom the veteran imposter allowed the Earl of Shaftesbury, his kinsman, to nominate, vouch his “righteousness,” the opium-smugglers, the dealers in “*sweet poison for the age’s tooth*” vouch his faithful service to “*commodity, the bias of the world*.” Burke, the Scotchman, was proud of the London “Resurrectionists.” So is Palmerston of the Liverpool “poisons.” These *smooth-face gentlemen* are the worthy representatives of a town, the pedigree of whose greatness may be directly traced back to the slave trade (MECW, VI5, 219).

The smooth-faced commodity in the 13th century setting of *King John* inverts honourable warfare and diplomacy between England and France. Similar to

13 All lines from *King John* are taken from the Arden edition 2018.

Timon's rant, the Bastard's soliloquy also contains a list of money's inversions. Unlike Timon, who is steadfast and tragic in his opposition to the moneyed world, the Bastard is himself corrupted by the promise of gain. While capitalism is not yet visible in the 13th century, aspects of commodification appear, especially during the reign of the historical King John. Shakespeare uses the distant setting of King John's time to register the contradictions of commodity relations, whose historical origins as early capitalism make their appearance in the mid 1590s in London, when Shakespeare wrote *King John*. By citing *King John* in his critique of British imperialism, Marx is using the pressure the play's inversions exert on the reader's consciousness to act similarly for the contemporary contradictions he is critiquing. The logic in Shakespeare's literature transfers very well to Marx's journalism, because the settings of the play, the writing of the play and Marx's use of the play are each set in significant time periods in the development of commodity relations. During King John's 13th century, feudalism underwent a transformation that prepared for its future replacement by capitalism, which began at the end of Shakespeare's 16th century, and reached its first mature modern phase in Marx's mid-to-late 19th century.¹⁴ Commodity relations caused social inversions in all three periods. The unfolding of the solution to these inversions logically derives the imperative to overthrow the capitalist system.

At the end of the section in *Capital Vol. 1* where Marx derives the central mechanism of capitalist inversion—commodity fetishism—Marx reaches for Shakespeare again. He writes:

The mysterious character of the commodity form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. (Marx, 1977, 164)

...as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head...(*auf den Kopf*) (Marx 1977, 163)

14 The historical John's father, Henry II, changed the relationship between the crown and the barons. Instead of using the customary temporary loans of knights from each baron to fight his wars, he asked for money from them so that he could fund his own army. Not only did this replace some feudal relations with monetary relations, but it was also an early gesture towards the construction of the modern nation-state with its own standing army. Henry II also centralised the power of the government and institutionalised legal reforms (Halliday 49). His son Richard I, John's brother, put much up for sale—privileges, lordships, earldoms, sheriffdoms, castles and towns—to fund his Crusades (Warren 38). This was a step in the commodification of what was formerly feudal right. The germ of modern capitalist relations was present in the feudal period during King John's reign.

Commodity fetishism, the most pernicious form of social inversions, can lead to a complete takeover of one’s intellectual and psychological capacities that not only blinds one to the inner workings of capitalism, but also causes one to fall in devotional love with its supreme idol, money. Marx turns to the topsy-turvy world of *Much Ado About Nothing* to express the problem of commodity fetishism. This is his final paragraph in that section:

So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond. The economists who have discovered this chemical substance ... nevertheless find that the use-value of material objects belongs to them independently of their material properties, while their (exchange-)value, on the other hand, forms a part of them as objects. What confirms them in this view is the peculiar circumstance that the use-value of a thing is realised without exchange, i.e. in the direct relation between the thing and man, while inversely, its value is realised only in exchange, i.e. in a social process. Who would not call to mind at this point the advice given by the good Dogberry to the night-watchman Seacoal? ‘to be a well-favoured man is the gift of fortune; but reading and writing comes by nature’ (Marx 1977, 177).

Much Ado is one of Shakespeare’s comedies that swerves the closest to tragedy. A strong device is needed to transform the plot direction back towards comedy. That will be carried out by the character that Marx quotes at the end of *Capital* Chapter 1. The night before the wedding of Hero and Claudio, Dogberry, the inept constable, assembles his night watch. Dogberry speaks in inverted malapropisms—‘dissemble’ instead of assemble, ‘salvation’ instead of damnation, ‘desertless’ instead of deserving—and delivers orders that invert the expected job of a night watch. He tells them that if they should encounter a vagrant they should order him to stand, but that if he does not stand, then they should take no note of him because he is a knave; and that if they meet a thief they may suspect him to be no true man and let him ‘steal out of [their] company’. It is during this night watch briefing that Dogberry speaks the inversion quoted by Marx. Dogberry and his watch are depicted as wholly incapable of noting crime and apprehending it. However, that night they accidentally come across one of Don John’s conspirators bragging about the trick he played on Claudio and Hero to derail their wedding. The night watch apprehend the character and take him to the Governor, Hero’s father. Dogberry’s verbal incompetence tries the Governor’s patience and the Governor proceeds to the fateful wedding without hearing the information he needs to avert the tragedy. The events at the wedding drive the play into tragic depths; Hero is falsely accused of infidelity, condemned and abandoned by both her husband-to-be and her father, swoons and appears to die. After the wedding, the constable is finally able

to deliver his report about the plot on Hero's reputation and the play is re-directed back towards a comedic ending. Dogberry is the dialectical change agent of this play.¹⁵ His ineptitude inverts his post. This causes him to be unable to deliver his report in a timely manner before the wedding. However, this works out for another set of lovers, Benedick and Beatrice, because it causes them to be confronted by the tragic events at Hero's wedding, and unites them in love through the mediation of their sympathy for Hero. When Dogberry finally delivers the report to the Governor, he is the agent that spins the play around again. Hero and Claudio finally marry alongside Beatrice and Benedick. These vertiginous inversions in Shakespeare's plays are useful for Marx to depict the vertiginous inversions that exchange-value causes in the economy and its superstructures.

Alongside his quotations from *Timon of Athens*, Marx also quotes Goethe's *Faust*.

In the *1844 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Marx writes:

By possessing the property of buying everything, by possessing the property of appropriating all objects, money is thus the object of eminent possession. The universality of its property is the omnipotence of its being. It is therefore regarded as omnipotent... Money is the procurer between man's need and the object, between his life and his means of life. But that which mediates my life for me, also mediates the existence of other people for me. For me it is the other person (MECW, V3, 323).

Then Marx quotes from *Faust*:

“What, man! Confound it, hands and feet
And head and backside, all are yours!
And what we take while life is sweet,
Is that to be declared not ours?
Six stallions, say, I can afford,
Is not their strength my property?
I run on, a fine man,
As if I had twenty-four legs” (323).¹⁶

15 In the 1870s, while Marx and his family were living in London, they began a Shakespeare reading club called the Dogberry Club, which met at their home. This constituted one part of Eleanor Marx's project to use Shakespeare readings and criticism to teach and radicalise late C19 workers for the union struggle and the revolution. This is a direct example of using literary criticism to create activists. It is discussed in the present author's monograph, *Shakespeare's Influence on Karl Marx* (forthcoming, Routledge).

16 Translation corrected by author

Then Marx writes the entire *Timon* quotation that he uses throughout his economics: from 4.3.26 to 44 and also from 4.3.377 to 387. His interpretation of these two literary quotations introduces his theories of commodity fetishism and alienation. Marx writes:

Shakespeare excellently depicts the real nature of money. To understand him, let us begin, first of all, by expounding the passage from Goethe.

That which is for me through the medium of money—that for which I can pay (i.e., which money can buy)—that am I myself, the possessor of the money. The extent of the power of money is the extent of my power. Money’s properties are my—the possessor’s—properties and essential powers. Thus, what I am and am capable of is by no means determined by my individuality. I am ugly, but I can buy for myself the most beautiful of women. Therefore, I am not ugly, for the effect of ugliness—its deterrent power—is nullified by money. I according to my individual characteristics am lame, but money furnishes me with twenty-four feet....Does not my money, therefore, transform all my incapacities into their contrary? (*MECW*, V3, 324).

The lines from *Faust* are spoken by Mephistopheles when he is closing the deal for Faust’s soul. There are two conceits in these lines that are useful for Marx. First, money makes the impossible possible. It is the procurer and transformer of all. Second, it appears that, in the money economy, the capacities to do all this lie in money itself. The last two lines in the quotation are, “Ich renne zu und bin ein rechter Mann./ Als hätt ich vierundzwanzig Beine” (Goethe 1997, 1826-7).¹⁷ The character in Mephistopheles’ example tears along using the strength of the six stallions he has purchased, as if that strength were the strength of his own legs. In this same manner, Mephistopheles is offering Faust the strength of the devil for the price of Faust’s soul. In Marx’s passage above, he says that he is lame in his individual characteristics, but that money has furnished him with twenty-four feet, an allusion to Mephistopheles’ promise of six stallions (six stallions times four feet each equals twenty-four). In the metaphor, ‘I’ stands for the commodity capital, and the stallions stand for the real source of value, the working class.

Alongside his *Timon* quotations in both *Capital*, Vol. 1 (1977, 229) and *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (*MECW*, V29, 451), Marx also quotes Sophocles’ *Antigone*. The lines are spoken by Creon when he is told by a sentinel that someone has attempted to bury Polynices, whom Creon has declared unworthy of burial. Creon assumes that someone did it for payment and says:

¹⁷ I run on and am a fine man/ As if I had twenty-four legs.

Money! Nothing worse
 In our lives, so current, rampant, so corrupting.
 Money – you demolish cities, root men from their homes,
 You train and twist good minds and set them on
 To the most atrocious schemes. No limit,
 You make them adept at every kind of outrage,
 Every godless crime – money!

In *Capital*, Marx uses the quotation to illustrate that, “ancient society therefore denounced it [gold] as tending to destroy the economic and moral order.” He then writes, “Modern society, which already in its infancy had pulled Pluto by the hair of his head from the bowels of the earth, greets gold as the Holy Grail, as the glittering incarnation of its innermost principle of life,” and he adds a quotation from Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophistae*: “Avarice hopes to drag Pluto himself out of the bowels of the earth” (MECW, V29, 451).¹⁸

In the *Outline to the Critique of Political Economy*, a set of notebooks Marx wrote from late 1857 to May 1858 (*Grundrisse*), he quotes from *Timon of Athens* and Virgil’s *Aeneid*:

The exchangeability of all products, activities, relationships for a third, objective entity, which in turn can be exchanged for everything without distinction – in other words, the development of exchange values (and of monetary relationships) is identical with general venality, with corruption. General prostitution appears as a necessary phase in the development of the social character of personal inclinations, capacities, abilities, activities. More politely expressed: the universal relationship of utility and usefulness. Equating the incommensurate, as Shakespeare appropriately conceived of money. [footnote here: ‘Thou visible god, that solder’st close impossibilities.’] The craving for enrichment as such is impossible without money; all other accumulation and craving for accumulation appears merely natural, restricted, conditioned on the one hand by needs and on the other hand by the restricted nature of the products (*sacra auri famas*) (MECW, VI5, 99-100).

This passage contains Marx’s theory of money as the objective entity that is used as the general equivalent and his metaphor in which the prostitute stands for the general venality and corruption that springs from the money economy. The passage then presents a third image, “the accursed passion for gold,” from Book 3 of Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

¹⁸ Marx cites this quotation from Demetrius Phalereus in a tract about the digging of gold in mines.

This quotation comes from the story of Aeneas’ attempt to set up a town on the shores of Thrace after escaping the destruction of Troy. The Thracians were once allied with the Trojans. The Trojan king, Priam, had sent Polydorus there during the war with some gold. When it became clear to the king of Thrace that the Trojans were losing the war, he switched to the Greek side, killed Polydorus and seized the gold. Aeneas discovers this when he tries to pull up some trees to make shelters, but the trees turn out to be the buried Polydorus, who tells him about his tragic fate. Aeneas is deeply affected and speaks the lines: “*quid non mortalia pectora cogis, auri sacra fames!*”¹⁹ (Virgil 1986, 3.57)

Marx also quotes from and alludes to Miguel de Cervantes’ texts, including *Don Quixote* and *Coloquio de los perros*. There are at least sixty-one instances of Cervantes intertextuality in Marx’s texts and more in Engels’ writings.²⁰ In *Capital Vol. 1*, Marx uses a scene from *Don Quixote* in his theory of commodity relations. He writes:

What chiefly distinguishes a commodity from its owner is the fact that it looks upon every other commodity as but the form of appearance of its own value. A born leveller and a cynic, it is always ready to exchange not only soul, but body, with any and every other commodity, be it more repulsive than Maritornes herself (1977, 179).

Maritornes is an ugly and repulsive character that Don Quixote meets when he arrives at a country inn, which he takes to be a castle. She is a servant at the inn and is described as, “an Asturian girl with a broad face, a back of head that was flat, a nose that was snubbed, and one eye that was blind, while the other was not in very good condition” (Cervantes 2003, 109). Don Quixote, under the influence of his madness, which serves, similar to Dogberry’s incompetence, as the dialectical change agent of the novel, believes that she is the Goddess of Beauty. Cervantes writes:

He touched her chemise, and though it was made of burlap, to him it seemed the finest and sheerest silk. On her wrists she wore glass beads, but he imagined them to be precious pearls of the Orient. Her tresses, which were rather like a horse’s mane, he deemed strands of shining Arabian gold whose brilliance made the sun seem dim. And her breath, which undoubtedly smelled of yesterday’s

19 To what lengths will man’s passion for gold not lead him?

20 This comes from research conducted by the present author on Cervantes’ influence on Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It has not been published yet. S. S. Praver (1978) also discusses some of Marx’s Cervantian quotations and allusions.

stale salad, seemed to him a soft, aromatic scent wafting from her mouth (Cervantes, 2003, 113).

Marx's allusion works to register the utter contradiction in the composition of commodities. The scene in the novel works as it does, because Maritornes, who is repulsive "enough to make any man...vomit," is taken by Don Quixote to be the Goddess of Beauty. Similarly, in the commodity, human labour which produces specific products for use, can only acquire value when it is alienated into its opposite, abstract social labour, to be exchanged as a commodity. Under the sway of commodity relations and fetishism, only exchange value, with its vile imperative to exploit and accumulate, seems enticing.

Still there is another layer of meaning in Marx's allusion. Towards the end of Part One of the novel, Don Quixote returns to the inn where Maritornes is a servant. She and the innkeeper's daughter decide to play a trick on him. Don Quixote is stationed outside, on his horse, protecting the inn, which he still thinks is a castle. He is lamenting to himself about his love for his lady, Dulcinea. The girls call to him from a window in the loft in an attempt to make him perjure his fidelity for Dulcinea. In his mind, he sees two damsels standing behind the golden grillwork of a castle window, calling amorously to him. Maritornes asks for Don Quixote's hand to satisfy her desire for a man, whom her father has prevented her from seeing. For the sake of the damsel in sexual distress, Don Quixote sacrifices his absolute fidelity to his lady and gives Maritornes his hand. The ugly servant, meanwhile, has prepared a slip knot in the halter of Sancho Panza's donkey and places it over Quixote's wrist. She ties the other end to a lock on the loft door and leaves the knight dangling painfully with his arm tied in the halter. He must spend the rest of the night in this torture position. When this problem from the story is layered into Marx's text, it offers the image of this betrayal and torture to Marx's unfolding logic that workers who sell their labour power enter into an inverted world of painful exploitation. Capitalism hurts. It hurts its human players in the manner in which they are the most vulnerable. Marx's use of Cervantes in his text carries not only the weight of Quixote's pain in it, but also the contradiction that pushes for resolution.

5

With each instance of inversion sourced from world literature that Marx inserts in his critique of capitalism, he transfers into his text the impulse of the contradiction to resolve itself. This contradiction registers, in the form and content of the literature, the actual contradictions in the author's world. As such, when the literature is used by Marx in his critique of his present world, it exerts

the force of the historical struggle—abstracted, concentrated and amplified—to oppose and resolve the contradictions. In the case of the examples discussed in this paper, it can be seen that poets and writers throughout literary history, from Homer to Shakespeare to Heine, have registered the vile tendency of money to invert the world into chaos and brutality. Commodity relations are shown to be inimical to a just society, a good life and an ethical world. They convert every part of human life into the profit motive, and thereby invert good into bad, fair into foul. Marxism shows that capitalism is riddled with fundamental contradictions which not only exploit workers and damage social relations, but will also destroy the planet and capitalism itself. Marx’s texts unfold the problem using documentation, critique and literary intertextuality. The activist step that arises from the logic of Marxism is clear, obvious and necessary—capitalism must be overthrown and it is the historical task of its victims—the proletariat—to do this.

In 1845, Marx wrote a thesis that can be understood as the imperative for the move from theory to activism: “Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden *interpretiert*, es kömmt drauf an, sie zu *verändern*.” (Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it.) (MECW, V5, 5). In 1848, Marx and Engels actualised this thesis by calling for the overthrow of capitalism and its states in their *Communist Manifesto*. At that point, Marx’s method was no longer German idealism; it proceeded using dialectical logic in a materialist manner, no longer restrained by the transcendentalism of Kant or the idealism of Hegel. Marx’s dialectical materialism makes the unfolding from theory to activism imperative.²¹

Similarly, literary criticism is well-placed to unfold clear, obvious and necessary logic which leads to revolutionary activism. As in Marx’s texts, but differently organised, the ingredients for the activist conclusion from literary criticism are all there: the well-formed artwork of literature and the critical theory that interprets it. Both the artwork and the theory unfold an imperative for social change. The artwork does so when it confronts the subject and provides the conditions for his de-reification. The criticism does so when it interprets the contradictions folded in the artwork and presents them to the reader/student/scholar as a social problem. The next step is already sitting restless in the interpretation; its urge is the imperative to confront the problem and overthrow its cause.

Feminist literary criticism contains the logic of activism to confront sexism

21 An obvious note to mention here is that “Marxism” and “dialectical materialism” have been the stated theoretical groundwork of many revolutionary movements in world history. The aim of this essay is not to focus on any of that history. For one example of the role of literary criticism in a real-existing socialist situation see the chapter on the German Shakespeare Society in the German Democratic Republic in Christa Jansohn’s 2006 book, *German Shakespeare Studies at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Newark: U of Delaware.

and misogyny. Critical Race Studies contains the logic of activism to confront racism and white supremacy. Queer theory contains the logic of activism to confront not only homophobia and Queer bashing, but also the very straightness of knowledge. And so on for postcolonial criticism, ecocriticism, disability studies, animal studies, and all the other similar subfields of literary criticism.²²

6

Who will be the activist? Capitalism creates the very class struggle which will overthrow it. On the one side stands the global oligarchic ruling class and on the other side stands the exploited working class, whose interests are to resolve the contradictions by overthrowing capitalism. If this revolution were to be carried out, history would be moved into its next stage, which has been called by Marx and others, *communism*.

However, the activism of the working class does not always end up being revolutionary. Historically, there have been two general directions in which the working class move to resolve the contradictions of their exploitation by capitalists. Broadly, opponents of capitalism proceed towards some variant of fascism or, in the opposite direction, some variant of socialism and communism. The move towards fascism is usually grounded in and funded by strong emotions and potent nostalgia. Conversely, the move towards socialism and communism requires logic, and is usually led by revolutionaries whose minds labour in theory.

In his early journalism, Marx writes about the role of philosophy in confronting societal contradictions. The material needs of people—the struggle of the flesh and blood—present themselves *first*. In his article on press freedom, Marx writes that the role of the press is to serve as a practice where humans could reflect critically on their selves and their societies. Through this practice of self-reflection and criticism of their needs and desires and of the structures of society they construct to satisfy these yearnings, humans produce the abstraction *Geist—a consciousness of their self in the world*. This philosophical abstraction arises from material needs and elevates material needs to the level of philosophical logic (*MEGA 1.1*, 183).

However, philosophical thinking is difficult, time consuming, and appears weak in the face of oppression which clamours for immediate action. Hegel also understood this, and, though he felt that doing philosophy was the best path towards constructing a rational, free and just society which was grounded

²² Literary criticism is not only further complicated but also amplified by intersectionality such as class and race analysis, gender and race analysis, and the interpretation of ecocriticism in light of postcolonial theory, to name but a few.

in mutual recognition and the unfolding of the Idea as the Absolute, he also understood that the people needed another way to glimpse the Absolute. For Hegel, this was the role of religion and art. Both religion and art construct objects which encapsulate the Absolute and confront the subject with a well-formed version of the Absolute.

Marxist critique of religion holds that religion serves to alleviate the suffering of exploitative conditions by substituting religious feeling for genuine human happiness, and thereby allowing the contradictions and injustices of the world to remain unchallenged. Religion cannot be revolutionary.²³

Art, on the other hand, does have a role to play in the revolution. Accordingly, Marx inserted hundreds of lines, images, rhetoric, scenes, and concepts from world literature into his revolutionary writings, writings which Marx intended to generate activism that leads to revolution. Marx believed that art could allow subjects to glimpse the unfolding of the revolution. In Hegel’s philosophy, the activist power of art remained latent, for, in his method, the logic unfolds on its own, not as the material actions of real people in history. For Hegel, art only showed people the absolute Idea; it did not stimulate them to construct it. Marx’s revolutionary dialectical materialism inverts this notion, thereby making the latent activist dialectic manifest.

To stand for the revolution in his writings, Marx recruits two of Shakespeare’s characters: Hamlet and Robin Goodfellow. Marx inserts an image from *Hamlet* into the logic of the *Communist Manifesto*. He writes:

Alle festen, eingerosteten Verhältnisse mit ihrem Gefolge von altehrwürdigen Vorstellungen und Anschauungen werden aufgelöst, alle neugebildeten veralten, ehe sie verknöchern können. Alles Ständische und Stehende verdampft (1999, 23).

All fixed, rusted-up relations, with their train of ancient and venerable ideas and views, are dissolved, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is corporative and standing evaporates.²⁴

This is an allusion to Hamlet’s first soliloquy: “O that this too too solid flesh would melt,/ Thaw and resolve itself into a dew” (1.2.129-130),²⁵ which is rendered in

23 See the *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (MEGA I.2)

24 The last line is sometimes mistranslated as “All that is solid melts into air.” The word *Ständische* also connotes the estates that existed in C19 Prussia. Marx meant that they too will be erased by modern capitalism.

25 All lines from *Hamlet* are taken from the Arden Edition, 2006.

German by Marx's university professor, August W. Schlegel: "O schmelze doch dies allzu feste Fleisch./ Zergin', und löst' in einen Tau sich auf!"

The *Communist Manifesto* corrects and continues the dialectic in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Hegel's comedic closures—private property, the family, the corporation, and the state—are sublated by Marx and Engels, as *required* by Hegel's dialectical method. This dialectical unfolding towards revolution is the manifest *freedom* of the philosophy carried out by *real* historical actors. In Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, he writes that *Geist* has been progressing through history towards its goal to know itself. Hegel writes:

Spirit often seems to have forgotten and lost itself, but inwardly opposed to itself, it is inwardly working ever forward (as when Hamlet says of the ghost of his father, "Well said, old mole! canst work i' the ground so fast?") until grown strong in itself it bursts asunder the crust of earth which divided it from the sun, its Notion, so that the earth crumbles away (Hegel *Vorlesungen*, 456)

Marx picks up this conceit and changes the goal of the consciousness. Instead of the abstraction *Geist* knowing itself to be the absolute Idea, in Marx's 1852 *18th Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte*, the revolutionary *Geist* of the proletariat is triggered, by the "the old mole", revolutionary consciousness that has been burrowing underground in Europe (*MECW*, VI1). In his speech at the anniversary of the *People's Paper* in 1856, Marx will mix Puck, the dialectical change agent in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with King Hamlet as ghost together in an image. He writes: "We do recognise our brave friend, Robin Goodfellow, the old mole that can work in the earth so fast, that worthy pioneer – the Revolution" (1996) Hamlet, the prince and philosopher, learns from his father-as-ghost, who he calls an "old mole" who "canst work i'th' earth so fast" (1.5.161), that he was murdered by Claudius. He makes some decisions: that Denmark is rotten, that he has been wronged, and that he is the one to set it right. The first two are the contradictions that seek resolution, and the third is the activist imperative. Hamlet, who has been accused by some critics of exemplifying bad revolutionary strategy because he goes it alone, actually begins his organising immediately after stating that he must take action:

The time is out of joint; O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right!
Nay, come, let's go together. (1.5.186-8)

To whom is he speaking his last line? To Horatio and Marcellus, to the audience, or to both, as theatrical lines can do.

Hamlet will use art, in this case theatre, for his activism. At the end of his “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!” soliloquy, where he wonders how the First Actor can produce tears in himself through his acting of Priam and Hecuba, Hamlet decides to expose Claudius’ crime and raise consciousness in the court by staging a play that represents and mirrors the usurper’s deeds. Hamlet ends his soliloquy with: “The play’s the thing/ Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King.”

The other character depicted by Marx as the revolution is Robin Goodfellow, the puck in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Robin is the dialectical change agent of the play. He performs most of the metamorphoses of the play. When he comes upon the Mechanicals in the woods, he notices that they are rehearsing for a play. He decides that he will be an “auditor” or “an actor too... if [he] see[s] cause” (3.1.74-5).²⁶ As the transformative power of art personified, Robin Goodfellow is teamed up with Hamlet’s father to awaken the consciousness of Marx’s readers and listeners and to unfold the activist logic required for action from the need to resolve the contradictions he finds.²⁷ This activist logic, sourced from literature and criticism, can function as a pathway along which theory can be transformed from interpretive to activist.

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²⁶ All lines from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are taken from the Arden edition, 2017.

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